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Information Poetics

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The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing by Paul Stephens. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 240 + xvi pp. Paperback: $25.00

> I have nearly unlimited access to music; I can audio-record my entire day; I can record high-definition video and send it wirelessly. There are over forty thousand messages in my Gmail inbox. The world's major newspapers are continually updated by the minute. Thanks to my mobile web browser, I have access to more words than were contained in the National Library of Ireland on June 16, 1904. On that day, Leopold Bloom carried the following items in his pocket. (ix)

What do we mean by *information*? How can we discuss its poetics—the discourse of the making of art or writing as its condition of possibility? There are three distinct uses of the term at work in Paul Stephens's revisionist history of the American avant-garde tradition. Stephens's baseline narrative is the pervasive sense of being overwhelmed that we live and suffer on a daily basis, readily identifiable in the quotation above and reflected in the covers of self-help publications with titles such as *Surviving Information Overload*, *Information Anxiety*, and *Overload! How Too Much Information Is Hazardous to Your Organization* (xii–xiii). A second narrative begins with modernism's imitation of information surplus, represented by the list of

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random items in Leopold Bloom's pocket, continuing through the textual experiments of Gertrude Stein and the avant-garde "Revolution of the Word" of the 1930s, and ending at a point of convergence with conceptual art and writing, from the 1960s to now. As initial premise, Stephens wants to show how modernism and the avant-garde in its development recognized, contested, transformed, and made something new out of the technological development of what has been called, from the 1950s on, the "information society." The two narratives of development parallel and support each other, in a continuous present of technological determinism: the increasing tendency toward ever-greater information resources as a consequence of the media and technology that create and access them and the parallel development of avant-garde forms that represent or reflect on surplus information. Stephens's focus on the avant-garde—despite disparities of scale between big data or mass media and the elusive and inaccessible works of individuals and coteries—is his overarching claim: that works of experimental art and literature provide the best register, and potential remedy for, the condition in which we live: "Although information technology has typically been figured as hostile or foreign to poetry, . . . avant-garde poetry has been centrally concerned with technologies of communication, data storage, and bureaucratic control—not simply rejecting those technologies, but also adopting and commenting on them" (1).

Innovations of modernist and avant-garde poetics thus intersect with information in ways that produce a proliferation of forms that reflect on, as they counteract, this overload. But here the question is precisely how the convergence of poetic form and what Mark Poster termed "the mode of information" takes place. At the basis of this question is what is meant by "information" and even more specifically its relation to the language that embodies it. Mediated processes of storage and retrieval are anything but neutral to the information—or the knowledge and language—they represent. At the intersection of information and poetics is a set of parallel but also negative conditions in which, for Poster, "the representational function of language has been placed in question by the differential communicational patterns each of which shift to the forefront the self-referential aspect of language."[1] Rendering a form of knowledge—for example, the catalogue of the National Library of Ireland—into information (the card catalogue that accesses it) transforms the library's content into something entirely different, a differential system that turns its content into a formalized set of metadata.

For Ron Day, the modern invention of information is thus a politically and culturally invested process that leads to social "command and control," on the one hand, along with the illusion of an equivalence and transparency of information in its major forms, on the other: "Information and communication technologies are not just representational or 'virtual' at the level of presenting visual or auditory simulacra; they themselves may constitute instances of representation or virtuality insofar as they are substitutional or tropic figurations that mediate the future both technologically and semiotically."[2] The concept of "information overload" depends on such large-scale figurations, in ways that obscure or overwrite the relation of information to the objects of knowledge or language it represents. "Information" is thus a differential rather than a positive term, as it produces a form of representation—metadata, code, or language—that strips the object of knowledge from its manner of indexical organization. In order to access fully the potential relationship of forms of poetry and art to information, then, the poetics of information itself must be described, not in the metaphor of a "mass of data" but in the precise constitution of its elements.

The third narrative of *information poetics*, then, must be that which comprehends the specificity of both terms. Information in this sense reflects the development of information theory, after its primary instance in Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948). For Shannon and Weaver, information is the radical stripping of content (the message to be conveyed) from its mode of communication, reduced to a measure representing the probability of its being received *as* message as its quantity of information. The mathematics of quantifying information as probability led Shannon and Weaver to reduce information to its minimal unit, the *bit* or binary digit, from which as we know all computer languages and digital media are now built. Reducing information to minimal units is provisionally a radical formalism in which meaning, message, or content are elided for their greater technological capacity for being transmitted and received. However, even at the basic level of the construction of information as a probabilistic calculation of minimal units or bits, there is a payoff for a politics of information overload in a positive as well as negative sense: "The concept of information applies not to the individual messages (as the concept of meaning would), but rather to the situation as a whole, the unit information indicating that in this situation one has an amount of freedom of choice, in selecting a message, which it is convenient to regard as a standard

or unit amount."[3] The radical particularity of the bit, then, implies a horizon of freedom of choice that works through the probability of transmission to the meaning, message, or content that may be located through it (a freedom that may refer to post–World War II repudiations of totalitarian systems of meaning, Stalinist or fascist, that restrict "freedom of choice").

Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, develops another line from the radical formalism of the bit and its consequent dematerialization of content, seeing the relationship between information and meaning in the digital age to be the result of the persistence of immateriality within material forms as what she terms "virtuality": "From ATMs to the Internet, from the morphing programs used in *Terminator II* to the sophisticated visualization programs used to guide microsurgeries, information is increasingly perceived as interpenetrating material forms. . . . From here it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important, more *essential* than material forms. When this impression becomes part of your cultural mindset, you have entered the condition of virtuality**."**[4] Hayles's derivation of "virtuality" leads from media technology to the fantasmatic fiction and "information narratives" she reads, in which information and materiality combine and "data are thus humanized, and subjectivity is computerized, allowing them to join in a symbiotic union whose result is narrative."[5]

But it may equally be the abstract "freedom of choice," not merely the perception of informatic patterning, that results from the stripping of content to bits that is most crucial for an information poetics. Here, the *radical particularity* of the bit suggests a relationship to the ubiquitous formal device of the nonnarrative foregrounding of the part within a larger whole that we find everywhere in works of the avant-garde, from Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams to Language and conceptual writing.[6] Poets and conceptual artists, in a way entirely different from the virtual fantasies of cyber- or postmodern fiction, exploit the tension between abstract information and its material embodiment in alternative forms. A central strength of Stephens's *Poetics of Information Overload*, then, is not merely to draw a technologically determined parallel between information society and the avant-garde but to show how a series of nonnarrative forms, which foreground both materiality and particularity, intersect with the technological series in ways that do not simply reproduce it. The history of avant-garde formal innovation will not necessarily be progressive, teleological, or even consistent. Rather, it shows how the forms of the avant-garde provide

ways of comprehending the vastness and abstraction of information while not simply succumbing to it—although here an objection may be raised of the avant-garde's self-reflexive textualization, a position taken by Paul Mann in his *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991).[7] But in positive terms, the avant-garde produces forms of "know-that" in terms of information society that are also forms of "know-how": the specific poetics of the avant-garde text itself as a form of agency. In showing how to avoid a "becoming virtual" that dissolves us into an overwhelming mass of data, avant-garde forms are important precisely because they *re*materialize what has been stripped from the knowledge and content of information. Their materiality and radical particularity thus counter the overstretched claims of simple technological determinism made by certain conceptual writers; the avant-garde rematerializes that which has been dematerialized and thus provides a form of poetic self-reflexivity as "what to make" of information. Arguing with a certain cultural studies pessimism associated with the work of Friedrich Kittler, who opines that "under conditions of high technology, literature has nothing more to say. It ends in cryptograms that defy interpretation and permit only interception," Stephens responds, "Against Kittler's pronouncement, poetries of information overload . . . demonstrate an extraordinary range of innovation responses to technological conditions" (36).[8]

Everything in such an argument for rematerialization and particularity depends on the example. Stephens's avant-garde texts are both recognizable to the cognoscenti of the avant-garde and surprising for their consistent "responses to technological conditions." An opening paradigm for information overload in the modernist period must surely be Gertrude Stein's 926-page *The Making of Americans* (1926), a text often seen as unreadable due to the sheer "wall of words" it presents. Stephens sees *The Making of Americans* as anything but the compendious archive (after Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*) that many readers find it to be, of "everyone who ever was or will be living"; rather, it is a form of mediation and rematerialization that supplants abstract patterns of modern social organization with the human insistence of her characters' "bottom natures," the facticity of their being that is not reducible to pattern. Even when David Hersland dies, thus entering the world of mere data, his death requires hundreds of pages of material text.[9] Stein's modern epic is framed, by Stephens, through her dismissal—in her 1946 essay "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb"—of the technological sublime, which she famously found to be "not interesting." Whereas the

abstract informatics of technology do not compel her, she produces an information text of her own order.

Such a DIY response to information overload is similarly evident in a slightly later, idiosyncratic project, the American expatriate poet Bob Brown's "Readies," in which he writes texts to be read and reproduced through machinic processes, much like contemporary ticker tape would reproduce stock prices. Brown's Readie machine, while predicting technology to come, is also a homemade folly that both symptomatizes and ironically undermines information overload. For Stephens, "The dream of the reading machine is cybernetic. . . . The reading machine counters the entropic decay of local languages by means of something like Maxwell's demon of reading, a demon who implants ideas directly into the brain of the globalized reader" (75). The ludic and even parodic impact of Brown's project—its "hyperbolic boosterism" (75)—saves it from sheer technological determinism, on the one hand, and keeps it from being an instance of an as-yet-to-come virtuality, on the other.

The modernist responses to information overload were written or imagined during a period when modernity was dominant but the forms of information society were not yet in place. With Charles Olson and later conceptual writers, however, reflection on the development of information theory and cybernetics is readable in the forms and texts of the postmodern. Olson's "The Kingfishers" (1949) prominently displays a quote from Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* (1948): "And what is the message? The message is / a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time,"[10] from about the time Olson invited Weiner onto the board of Black Mountain College. Two aspects of information theory and cybernetics are important for Olson: first, the project of an epic poem that organizes a vast archive of cultural information; and second, one that does so through forms of self-organization and *autopoiesis* that are irreducible to modernist forms of rational organization and knowledge retrieval. In countering modernity with poetic forms of cybernetic self-organization, Olson attempts to substitute the body of the poet as continuous with the world of things for the dissociation of subject-centered reason. Stephens notes, "As a model for the acquisition of knowledge, proprioception insists on an immediacy of engagement between mind and body, body and polis, as well as body and planet" (105). The ultimate tragedy of Olson's failure to realize this immediacy—at the limit of his physical body—underscores his difference from and contestation of the merely technological dimensions of cybernetics. What survives is Olson's material

text, not the occasion of its making (in the sense of Alfred North Whitehead's concepts of "occasion" and "event").

The spectacular failure of immanence in Olson's poetics, however, led in the next decades to more restricted, procedural experiments in rematerializing information. While the forms of art and writing that developed in early conceptual art had their origins primarily in questions about the nature of art after the turn to abstract painting and pop art, an as-yet-unremarked series of writers—from John Cage to Bern Porter, Hannah Weiner, and Bernadette Mayer and others—explored forms of textual materiality that, in retrospect, seem strongly motivated to reflect the excesses of information. Both the *Information* show at the Museum of Modern Art (1970) and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* . . . (1973) exhibit the turn to information as a central feature of conceptual art and writing.[11] Again, the material specificity of these projects counters the abstract formalism of information with texts that are often irreducible, unparaphrasable, intractable—anything but data to be absorbed in machinic forms of storage and retrieval. Work of this period, for this reason, continues to inspire artists and writers to explore textual forms that seem to perpetuate the informational sublime but in fact rematerialize it.

Stephens ends his genealogy of the avant-garde with Language and conceptual writing—the two movements that arguably gave him the framework for his series to begin with. The texts of Language writing, without question, often imitate or negotiate a vastness of scale of information that approaches the vastness of "language" itself, seen as a limit of the knowable and representable. It is this convergence, then, of the medium of language with anything represented in it that creates both support for and a contrary movement to Stephens's argument. In two of the narratives of information presented above—of the parallel developments of technology and literary forms—we witness a progressive development of storage and transmission capacity toward ever greater (and more frightening) horizons. The turn to language—unlike the unrestricted embodiment of "open field" poetry—creates a formal limit to informational vastness by the adoption of *language* as its operative principle. Otherwise put, Language writing seems not to worry about the information explosion because no amount of mere data could ever equal the combinatorial infinity of language itself. In the period of its emergence, Language writing registered many aspects of the digital culture to come, particularly the influence of algorithmic and computational procedures on formal strategies. Many Language writers

took jobs in the emerging cyber industry and have had careers there as much as in academia (a fact not sufficiently registered in its reception). But it is arguable that Language writing, across its many instances, did not seek to imitate or counter the development of digital media or information retrieval or the internet.

It is notable, then, that conceptual writers, concerned to distance themselves from the radical particularity of Language writing, claimed a technological determinism in advance of their own formal innovations. As well, the notion that conceptual writing need not be read but only comprehended for its procedures has had a curiously dematerializing impact on its otherwise massive texts—the prime example of which would be Kenneth Goldsmith's retyping of one day's edition of the *New York Times*, republished as the massive material text *Day* (2003).[12] A narrative of dematerialization—quite the opposite of the rematerialization evident in the genealogy from Stein to Language writing—suggests the possibility of an alternative politics: not a distancing comprehension of information overload but a seamless absorption into it. It is for this reason that this reader was gratified to see *The Poetics of Information Overload* conclude with a discussion of the ur–Language writer Robert Grenier's hand-drawn texts: the ultimate instance of antitechnological Luddism: regressive, intractable works of idiosyncratic genius that have since been scanned, digitized, archived, and made widely available online. Paul Stephens's contribution to the theory of the avant-garde is to show how these poets and visual artists, in their strategies of radical particularity and rematerialization, reclaim agency in the face of information overload—rather than be absorbed seamlessly into mighty clouds of virtuality.

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NOTES

1. Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13.
2. Ronald E. Day, *The Modern Invention of Information* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 74.
3. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), 9.
4. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 19.
5. Hayles, 39.
6. I develop my account of the *radical particular* as a formal device to be found

everywhere in the avant-garde, from its historical origins to the present, in the introduction and chapter 2 of Barrett Watten, *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016); see esp. 8–10 and 73–74.

7. Paul Mann, *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): e.g., "The avant-garde is completely immersed in a wide range of apparently ancillary phenomena—reviewing, exhibition, appraisal, reproduction, academic analysis, gossip, retrospection—all conceived within and as an economy, a system or field of circulation and exchange that is itself a function of a larger cultural economy" (7) and is thus, for Mann, itself an instance of information overload.

8. Stephens cites Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 263.

9. Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans: The History of a Family's Progress* (1926; repr., West Glover, VT: Something Else, 1970).

10. Charles Olson, *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 89–90; Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961).

11. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* . . . (1973; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

12. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003). An important query relative to Goldsmith's claim that conceptual writing is technologically determined by the rise of digital media would be to ask precisely when and why, in the making of his text, he abandoned manual retyping for OCR technology.